

Spectrum statescan



CRAFTING A LIVELIHOOD
Lacquerware is a traditional craft of Karnataka, largely practised by craftsmen in Channapatna.

The black metal magic

METAL & METTLE

In Bidar, divine fusions and nature inspire Bidriware magic. Unique traditions and strange ways are what make the art exotic, writes Hema Narayanan



There is magic in the Black Metal Art that is created by the artists of Bidar. They call the art Bidriware. Walking past the homes of Bidri Colony in Bidar, I saw artists immersed deep in metals, trying to create something beautiful with sheer skill and passion. Bidriware has been practised from as long as the 14th century CE, having originated during the rule of Bahamani sultans in the township of Bidar, then a part of erstwhile Hyderabad state. Undoubtedly breathtaking, but equally painstaking, the craft is characterised by intricate geometric and floral designs, inlaid with gold, silver or brass on to a matte-black or glossy surface. Artists convert an alloy of zinc and copper into blackened metal, inlaid with thin sheets of pure silver. This craft is kind of a Damascene work and its striking inlay work makes it a wonderful export handicraft of India.

Prized as a symbol of wealth, Bidri is famous for its sleek, smooth and dark coloured artefacts, with precise and eye-

catching designs. Over the years, Bidri Colony has evolved. From what started off as a handicraft, for producing exquisite Bidriware for *naunabs* and noblemen, the art has attained global fame today.

Fusions of heritage

Bidri art is a true portrayal of the Iranian and Indian heritages coming together. Local craftsmen believe that a few centuries ago, a nobleman, Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti brought the craft to Ajmer (in India) from Iran and Iraq. An Iranian craftsman, Abdullah-bin-Khaizer, later brought it to Bijapur in Karnataka. Impressed with his work in Bijapur, Bahamani Sultan invited him to work on decorating their royal palaces and courts in Bidar. According to some accounts, Khaizer joined hands with the local craftsmen and created Bidriware.

Though Iran is the actual home of this craft, the *sultans* and local people nurtured it further. After creating many artistic treasures, when the Iranian craftsmen's contract was over, the *sultan* asked them to stay back in India and teach the *koftgari* work (which later came to be known as Bidriware) to his artisans.

There is a particular type of soil found only in Bidar and in parts of Bidar Fort, which has a large role to play in the distinct nature of Bidriware. It has unique and special chemical properties that help in making the moulds for their objects. It can convert silver, zinc metals to a black metal by following a process.

What is more stunning is the method adopted to identify this soil. With no particular tools or scientific processes in place to isolate it, the artisans say that they ac-

tually taste the soil (even today), for a characteristic sharp taste, to determine if it is the desired kind of soil! Heard of wine tasters and tea tasters, but soil tasters? That's a first.

Mystery of black patina

The mystery of the black patina has not yet been fully solved, though it's a subject for many ongoing researches. How the ancient craftsmen developed such intricate chemical procedures is difficult to imagine. Bidriware, a Damascene technology, is more than a complex process. They casually use principles of Chemistry, which people think is the forte of the literati.

Bidriware is a result of six stages of production with four different kinds of artisans working on it – moulder, designer, engraver and inlay artist. After getting a smooth sur-

face of the mould, a solution of copper sulphate is poured on the article to darken it temporarily, for engraving. A few engraving tools are used to cut the intricate, but delicate tapestry of the design, into the metal. Then comes the inlay work of silver, brass or gold. Many women work as inlayers.

Here comes the magical role of the Bidar soil. Mixed with ammonium chloride and water, this soil is made into a paste. Small articles are directly dipped into the paste, while large articles are heated and the paste is rubbed on their surface.

It is incredible, how the paste has no effect on silver, but it renders the zinc alloy body into a deep characteristic black patina. Finally, the paste is rinsed off and the inlay design stands out dramatically. The shiny silver is resplendent against the black surface.



VARIED EFFORT Bidriware is a result of six stages of production with four different kinds of artisans. PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

Contemporary twist to Bidri

With time and the advent of new age, the modern twist to Bidriware is appealing. The earlier Bidri designs and motifs had *asharfi-ki-booti*, stars, vine creepers, poppy plants with flowers, Persian roses and passages from the *Quran* in Arabic script. Today, articles of daily use, like vases, cigar boxes, candle stands, letter openers, ash trays, cuff links, key chains, fruit bowls, hookah pipes, to name a few, find favour with the buyers.

Creativity requires the courage to let go of certainties. Few Indian designers have taken up lacquer work; stone inlay and Bidri work from traditional Indian handicraft and adapted them to create mesmerising artwork. A selective combination of old Persian motifs along with folk motifs and designs adopted from Ajanta frescoes signifies contemporary Bidriware.

In fact, we met an award winning artisan, Abdul Hakeem, who desired that we see their art and demonstrated it so vividly. It seemed like a story was unfolding...

Speaking to Hakeem, a state award winner and an artist of national merit, I could see the immense pride he had in being able to create Bidriware. He wished more people came to their village and saw how they infuse life into this art and learnt Bidriware themselves, so it could last for a longer time. If there were to be more thrust from the tourism department or the government, he feels that this art would achieve a higher status in India and globally, even though it has improved significantly over the years. The infrastructure they use to etch, carve or mould is still very basic and any support in getting improvised tools would enable them to produce magical art work in a shorter period of time.

Walking out of the Bidri village, I could not stop but think of what Leo Tolstoy once said: *Art is not a handicraft. It is the transmission of feeling, the artist has experienced.*

It was indeed the transmission of the feelings of these Indian master *karigars* of Bidar, their great ability and prowess, to assimilate a craft of foreign origin into India's heritage.

MISCELLANY

Temple of tales

The abode of Ambegalu Navaneetha Krishna is situated at Dodda Mallur, a small hamlet, about 68 km from Bengaluru, off the Bengaluru-Mysuru Highway. The tall *rajagopuram* of this shrine is clearly visible from the highway, about two km beyond Channapatna. We pass through a well-sculpted and beautifully decorated archway by the roadside to reach the temple complex comprising the main shrine of Lord Aprameya, Aravindavalli (Mahalakshmi) and the popular, crawling baby Krishna.

The shrine is towering and the majestic *rajagopuram* greets us at the entrance. This magnificent structure built in the Dravidian architectural style is embedded with statuettes of Lord Vishnu in different manifestations of his *dasavatara*. The main entrance, or *mahadwara*, is 30 feet high, and as we enter, we see a small statuette of Mahishasura Mardini on our left and Lord Ganesha on the right. A tall monolithic *dhwajastambha* is placed just in front of the doorway.

Facing the *rajagopuram*, a few metres away, is the four-pillared Purandaradasa *mantapa*, made from stone, with beautiful carvings all around, a tribute to the renowned Kannada classical music lyricist and composer. It is believed that Purandaradasa was inspired to compose and sing his famous *kriti Jagadodharana Adisidulu Yashoda* at this shrine.

Once inside the *parikrama* (enclosed compound), there is the *moola murthy* (main deity) Lord Vishnu in the form of Sri Aprameya. The tall, magnificent idol is made of *saligrama* stone, and is said to be around 1,500 years old. The lord is in the *abhaya hasta vishvaroopa* posture, holding the conch, *chakra*, mace and a lotus in his hands.

Just outside this sanctum is the Shukanasika *mantapam* made of sandalwood, which houses Lord Aprameya's *utsava murthy*. This is a replica of the main idol, crafted out of metal and is extremely beautiful. *Utsava murthy* is accompanied by his divine consorts Sridevi and Bhoodevi on either sides.

As we walk through the *parikrama* towards the left of the main sanctum, we reach the small shrine of Goddess Mahalakshmi, known here as Aravindavalli, due to the belief that she was born in a lotus flower in Vishnu theertha. The idol of Chaturbhuj Devi is seated in *padmasana* posture on a lotus.

We continue our *pradakshina* and reach the North Western corner of the *parikrama*. Here, we can see Ambegalu Navaneetha Krishna. *Ambegalu* means crawling on all fours. The adorable child Krishna is in a crawling posture, atop a flat *Garuda Peedham*. This is believed to be one of the very rare Krishna shrines where he is in the form of a toddler. The beautiful idol is made of shiny



Ambegalu Navaneetha Krishna temple in Dodda Mallur. PHOTO BY AUTHOR

black stone and is believed to have been installed by Veda Vyasa himself. The baby is holding a ball of butter (*navaneetha*) in his right hand, and appears to be moving towards us. It is known that couples offer silver and wooden cradles at this shrine to be blessed with children. *Janmashtami* is the most important festival at this shrine, when thousands of devotees throng to worship and seek Navaneetha Krishna's blessings.

The Dodda Mallur shrine is also known as Dakshina Ayodhya, based on a legend that Lord Rama had stayed here for a while during his exile. According to the annals of history, this temple complex was built in the 4th century by Chola emperor Rajendra, around the original sanctums where the idols already existed. It is surprising to learn that the whole temple complex is built on sand and does not have any solid base or foundation. Legend has it that great sages like Kapila and Kanva stayed here and worshipped Lord Aprameya in various *yugas*.

There is an interesting legend about the origin of the name Mallur. Many years ago, a king known as Sarangadhara had his hands cut off in a war by his enemies and was thrown into the Nirmala river, (now known as Kanva river) flowing nearby. In spite of severe pain and weakness, he managed to reach this temple and worshipped the Lord with all his heart.

Pleased with his devotion, the Lord blessed him, and the king got back his hands. Based on the word, *mulaithu*, meaning 'grew back', the place seems to have got its name Mulaithur, which was later shortened by usage to Mallur. **K Karunakaran**

Seeing in a different light

EDUCATING MINDS

Gender bias against girls has long deprived them of quality education. Lora Tomas finds out how Agastya Foundation is striving to make this go away by educating girls in an innovative manner

A high-pitched chatter and silvery tinkling of anklets fill the Agastya Foundation's minibus as a group of girls from a government school in the village of Donimadagu near Kolar Gold Fields town of Karnataka eagerly climb on board. The bus will take them to a school in Kyasamballi, an hour away, to participate in Agastya's Science Fair. For some weeks now, they've been taught analogue photography as part of Agastya's ongoing Abhivyakti Project, designed to empower painfully shy rural girls by engaging them in the Science and the art of making images. They've been also shown how to construct their own pinhole cameras. They are now exhibiting this at the Science Fair, and are expected to curate their work as well.

Twelve-year-old Uma in the seat in front of me, with two slick hoops of jasmine-scented braids, turns around and tells me about a pinhole image she has made – a floating rose flower. Just like the dark red one freshly pinned above her left plait.

The Abhivyakti Project – which started in mid-January and will continue till the end of March – was developed by Sandip Viswanathan and Subrahmanya Shastry, both project managers at the Bangalore-based non-profit educational trust, Agastya International Foundation. "We are trying to connect science and arts by teaching the girls about light travelling in straight lines, the ratios between parts of a pinhole camera, the chemistry of processing a film," says Viswanathan, who has devised the syllabus for the programme.

Creating awareness

"It's a seven-day course for each batch of girls, and altogether 300 girl students from several schools will be involved," explains Rudra Rakshit, a photographer from Bengaluru, who is conducting the workshops. "For the first four days, we learn how to construct a pinhole camera, and all the science behind it. Then they will develop the sense of composition by shooting with a digital camera, and hav-



LEARNING AND FUN Students with their pinhole camera. PHOTO BY AUTHOR

ing their images reviewed in class. After that, each of them gets an analogue camera for three days to make seven to nine images, which they will print later. With analogue photography, there is, perhaps, a heightened awareness that comes with the limited number of frames and tries. They have to think well in advance about the images they want to make, or the photographic narrative."

Science fervour

At the grounds of the GHPS in Kyasamballi, students of different schools are standing behind their models, displaying the stages of soil erosion, food chain, momentum preservation or resistance, and bending over see-your-own-pupil magic boxes, dynamos and light reflection charts. It's a little before noon and already oppressively hot, but they don't seem to mind. Sai Chandrashekar, the director of operations at Agastya, is also here. "Our aim is to offer integrated, hands-on learning," he says. "Rather than segmenting knowledge into various subjects and disciplines that succeed each other in timetables but rarely overlap, we look to explore a concept through various sciences, angles and perspectives."

The representatives of the project's sponsors, the GE India, R Ramakrishna Rao and Prashant Kumar N, share similar views. "We wanted to fund a programme that would empower rural girls, and Agastya's Abhivyakti was perfect in that sense," says Rao. "Girls in India don't get the same educational opportunities as boys. This deprives them of the chance to be self-sustainable, to master a skill or pursue a vocation that could be their livelihood one day. We want to instigate scientific thought in them, which will, in

“ The girls are taught science by making use of practical and efficient methods... ”

turn, incite social change at the grass-roots level. But too often, their education stops at the tenth standard. That's the reason we are investigating the possibilities of college and university scholarships for promising female students."

Back in the exhibition room, the girls are all lined up behind their pinhole cameras, in their striped ties and blue school uniforms, waiting for visitors to gush out facts and laws of Physics at them. The beige walls are covered with their framed photographs, quite outstanding pieces of work for rural kids that have just learned how to take pictures. One girl says there has always been an old analogue camera at her house, but she's never given it a second thought. Now she's dusted it off – to the somewhat displeased grunts of her dad – and wants to use it. Another wanted to shoot crows roosting in a tree, but later came up with a different idea. She asked a friend to agitate them, so she could capture them in flight.

In his influential book *Ways of Seeing*, based on his BBC television series of the same title, John Berger discusses the practices and styles of viewing and reproducing paintings, photographs, or billboards and the messages they convey about the age-old gender bias – women as 'sights' and not the seeing subjects, since the latter role has always been reserved for men. "Seeing comes before words," Berger begins. "The child looks and recognises before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing, which establishes our place in the surrounding world..."

Hopefully, this is exactly what these girls are doing.

Agastya Foundation can be contacted at www.agastya.org.